

The Link between Myths about Sexual Aggression and Sexual Objectification via Hostile Attitudes toward  
Women

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## Abstract

Sexual objectification of women is linked to a variety of negative attitudes and behaviour towards them, including myths about sexual aggression. The aim of the study was to examine the link between myths about sexual aggression and sexual objectification through hostile attitudes towards women. A sample of students and non-students ( $N=165$ ) completed a questionnaire that included the Acceptance of Modern Rape Myths about Sexual Aggression Scale, the Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale-Perpetrator Version, and a measure of hostility towards women. Results indicated that acceptance of myths about sexual aggression was positively correlated with sexual objectification and hostility towards women. In addition, acceptance of myths about sexual aggression was indirectly related to sexual objectification via hostile attitudes towards women. We discuss the implications of our findings for the relationship between the negative perceptions and treatment of women, particularly those relating to sexualised attitudes and rape-myth acceptance.

Keywords: rape myth acceptance, myths about sexual aggression, sexual objectification, hostility towards women

## The Link between Myths about Sexual Aggression and Sexual Objectification via Hostile Attitudes toward Women

Sexual aggression myths, including rape myths, are attitudes or beliefs that down-play, deny, or minimize victim injury and justify the perpetration of various forms of sexual aggression, such as rape and sexual harassment (Burt, 1980; Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010; Gerger, Kley, Bohner & Siebler, 2007).

Research suggests that myths about sexual aggression are closely linked to a larger constellation of beliefs that also predict general aggression directed towards women (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). More specifically, research has found a positive relationship between rape myth acceptance, hostility towards women (Sriwattanakomen, 2017; Hegarty, Stewart, Blockmans & Horvath, 2016; Malamuth, Linz, Heavey & Barnes, 1995), and sexual objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Workman & Freeburg, 1999; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez & Puvia, 2013). No research, however has examined whether acceptance of myths about sexual aggression is related to sexual objectification indirectly via hostility towards women. Thus, the current study aimed to replicate previous findings linking acceptance of myths about sexual aggression to engaging in sexual objectification, and examined how the link might partially be explained by men's hostile attitudes towards women. Although both genders adhere to myths about sexual aggression, research has shown that men are more likely to accept and endorse these myths than women (Emmers-Sommer, 2017; McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Vonderhaar & Carmody, 2015). As a result, our research focused on men's attitudes and behaviour. In the subsequent sections, we discuss the acceptance of myths about sexual aggression (or rape myths), sexual objectification, and how they may be indirectly linked through hostility towards women.

### **Rape myth acceptance**

Rape myths refer to prejudiced or stereotyped attitudes and false beliefs regarding rape, its victims, and its perpetrators (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). They can be used to justify and excuse men's inappropriate and/or sexually aggressive behaviour towards women (Burt, 1980; Bohner et al., 1998). Common rape myths cited in literature include: women enjoy being raped; women lie about being raped; and woman dressed a certain way are "asking for it" (Maxwell & Scott, 2014). These myths indirectly maintain a

patriarchal society by espousing attitudes and beliefs that shift the blame from the perpetrator to the victim, minimizing the severity of the sexual aggression, and questioning the victim's experience (Maxwell & Scott, 2014). Burt (1980), for instance, argued that rape myths lead to the maintenance of a rape culture which holds women responsible for their own victimization, thereby encouraging and normalizing victim-blaming. This reinforces hostility towards women.

Rape myths/myths about sexual aggression are informed by cultural and social norms and values that frame rape as a legitimate sexual act based on some men's perception of sexual entitlement over women (Abrahams, Jewkes, Hoffman & Laubsher, 2004). Men who hold this sense of sexual entitlement equate women to sexual objects, who are always receptive to sex, exist solely to fulfil men's sexual needs and enjoy being raped (Polaschek & Ward 2002; Abrahams et al., 2004). Thus, it can be purported that myths about sexual aggression are linked to a culture of sexually objectifying behaviour, where women are portrayed as objects for men to use, even if it involves sexual aggression. We examined this link in our paper, aiming, in part, to replicate previous findings showing that the acceptance of rape myths is positively related to sexual objectification of women.

Importantly, research also shows a link between rape myths acceptance and a variety of hostile attitudes, including rape proclivity (Malamuth, 1981; Malamuth & Check, 1985; Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002), support for interpersonal violence (Burt, 1980), hostile and benevolent sexism (Forbes, Adam-Curtis, & White, 2004; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), hostility toward women (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), and oppressive belief systems such as racism, classism and homophobia (Aosved & Long 2006). Suarez and Gadalla (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of 37 studies in North America and found that hostile attitudes and behaviour toward women, as well as other prejudices such as racism, classism and ageism were consistently associated with rape myths acceptance. Additionally, research conducted by Sriwattanakomen (2017) on 96 undergraduate students found that hostile attitudes towards women correlated very strongly and positively with rape myths acceptance.

### **Sexual Objectification**

Sexual objectification is the fragmentation of a person's physical body into sexual parts and/or sexual functions (Bartky, 1990). When an individual is sexually objectified, they are no longer viewed as a complete person, instead are seen as lacking depth and subjectivity, and existing primarily for the pleasure of others

(Nussbaum, 1995; Gervais & Eagan, 2017). Both men and women experience sexual objectification, but it is disproportionately directed towards women (Gervais & Eagan, 2017). The research herein focused on the sexual objectification of women by men.

Sexual objectification can manifest itself in a variety of forms, including gazing/leering at women's bodies, making sexual comments directed to women, and whistling/ honking at women. It is also positively correlated with a number of negative factors, such as hostile sexism (Cikara, Eberhardt & Fiske, 2011), rape proclivity (Rudman & Mescher, 2012), hostility towards women (Awasthi, 2017), and non-sexual aggression towards girls among youth (Vasquez, Osinnowo, Pina, Ball, & Bell, 2017). Objectification has detrimental effects on how objectified women are perceived and treated. Specifically, objectified women are stripped of their agency and competence, and viewed as being less fully human (Heflick, Goldenberg, Cooper, & Puvia, 2011). They are also perceived as less deserving of dignity, respect, and moral concern (Gervais & Eagan, 2017), and thus, are dehumanized (Loughnan et al., 2010). As a result, sexual objectification can lead to negative behaviour towards women, including non-sexual physical aggression (Vasquez et al., 2017), sexual harassment, sexual aggression, and/or sexual exploitation (Franz, DiLillo & Gervais, 2016; Gervais, DiLillo, & McChargue, 2014; Kozee, Tylka, Augustus-Horvath & Denchik, 2007; Fredricks & Roberts, 1997; Gervais & Eagan, 2017).

In essence, sexual objectification of women facilitates sexual and non-sexual aggression via its link to factors that decrease inhibition against such acts (e.g., de-humanisation of the objectified). The current study focused on the link between myths about sexual aggression and objectification. Men who have a greater tendency to sexually objectify women may be influenced by cultural and social myths that legitimize and normalize sexually aggressive behaviour towards women. As previously indicated, there is a positive association between sexual objectification and myths about sexual aggression (see Workman & Freeburg, 1999; Grubb & Harrower, 2009; Loughnan et al., 2013). Additionally, Bernard and colleagues (2015) conducted a study on the influence of sexual objectification on men and women's rape perceptions and found that sexual objectification increased victim blaming and reduced perpetrator blame in cases of stranger rape.

Thus, based on these findings, we hypothesised that there will be a positive relationship between the tendency to engage in objectifying behaviour and acceptance of myths about sexual aggression.

victim blame for a range of aggressive and violent behaviour, we expect that hostility towards women might explain why rape myths acceptance is linked to objectification. In the next section, we discuss hostility towards women and why it was expected to explain at least part of the relationship between myths about sexual aggression and the tendency to engage in the sexual objectification of women.

### **Hostility towards women**

Another factor relevant to myths about sexual aggression and objectification is hostility towards women, which is an attitudinal construct based on a hostile-distrustful orientation towards women and gratification from controlling or dominating them (Malamuth, Sockloskle, Koss & Tanaka, 1991; Murnen, Wright & Koluzny, 2002; Abbey, McAuslan & Ross, 1998; Gallagher & Parrot, 2011). Numerous studies show that hostility towards women is associated with sexual aggression and rape myths acceptance (Russell & King, 2017; Parkhill & Abbey, 2008; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995; Malamuth et al., 1991; Malamuth et al., 1995). Research also shows that men who endorse traditional gender-based attitudes and hold stronger dominance motives are more likely to endorse various rape myths (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Jacques-Tiura, Abbey, Parkhill & Zawacki, 2007). Further, men who have highly hostile attitudes towards women are also more likely to accept interpersonal violence against them (Hunter, Figueredo & Malamuth, 2010). Based on the literature on hostility towards women, we hypothesised that men who score high on hostility towards women would be more likely to endorse myths about sexual aggression.

Additionally, we hypothesised that hostility towards women explains, at least in part, the relationship between myths about sexual aggression and sexual objectification. There are several reasons for this hypothesis. For instance, according to the cultivation theory (Stermer & Burkley, 2012) repeated exposure to themes and images over a prolonged period leads to the assimilation and perpetuation of attitudinal endorsements of those themes into a person's world view. Current mainstream media (e.g., entertainment industries, print media, and social media platforms) often objectify and commodify women. This cultural milieu normalizes sexual objectification and eroticises and endorses sexual aggression (Hegarty et al., 2018; Mikorski & Szymanski, 2017). Thus, sexualisation of women becomes psychologically paired or associated with hostile attitudes and aggressive tendencies towards the sexualised. As a result, negative attitudes and perceptions are

attributed to those that are objectified and hostile attitudes towards them can be expected to increase (Rollero, 2013).

In addition, research has found that objectification is positively related to hostile sexism, sexist attitudes, hostility towards women, likelihood to sexually aggress and rape proclivity (Cikara et al., 2011; Rudman & Mescher, 2012; Rollero, 2013). As a result, men who endorse and accept myths about sexual aggression may be more likely to engage in objectifying behaviour when they harbour hostility towards women. Such hostility may justify the perception of women as less deserving of humane or moral treatment, even in the context of sex and sexual aggression. Thus, we predicted that there would be an indirect link between myths about sexual aggression and the tendency to engage in objectifying behaviour through hostility towards women.

## Method

### Participants

A convenience sample of 220 participants were recruited at a university in the southeast United Kingdom and through advertisements placed on social networking sites. As incentives, participants received either course credits or the chance to enter a draw to win a £25 Amazon voucher. However, 17 females participated and their responses were excluded from analyses. In addition, 36 male participants were excluded because they did not complete the questionnaire, and two participants were deleted because their responses indicated a failure to take the survey seriously. Thus, a total of 165 male participants were included in our analyses. Age ranged from 19 to 68 years ( $M_{age} = 27.41$ ,  $SD = 9.55$ ). Most participants self-identified as White (80%), with others as British Black or Black African (6.7%), British Indian or Indian (6.7%), British Asian or Asian (3.6%), Mixed or other (1.8%) and (0.6%) preferred not to say.

### Procedure

The study was conducted online using Qualtrics and was distributed through an anonymous link generated from it. Participants were first asked to read the information form and indicate their consent to participate by clicking to continue after reading the consent form. After completing all the measures, the participants were debriefed through the use of an online form at the end of the study.

## **Measures**

### **Demographic factors**

All participants completed a demographic questionnaire, which formed part of the battery of measures administered. The questions elicited information relating to gender, age, nationality, race, and relationship status, level of education, and income level.

### **Hostility toward Women Scale—Short Form**

The hostility toward women scale (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995) assesses anger and resentment toward women. The scale constitutes of 10 items such as, “Generally it is safer not to trust women” and “I think that most women just lie just to get ahead.” Item responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. High scores indicated greater hostility toward women. Concurrent and construct validity have been demonstrated through positive correlations with a measure of adversarial sexual beliefs and acceptance of interpersonal violence (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). The scale’s internal consistency was established at .89 (Check, 1985) and at .83 (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995).

### **Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale – Perpetrator Version (ISOS-P)**

The ISOSP (Gervais et al., 2014) is a modified version of the Interpersonal Sexual Objectification Scale (ISOS; Kozee et al., 2007) and measures the frequency with which people engage in body evaluation and explicit unwanted sexual advances. It consists of 15 items, such as “How often have you leered at someone’s body?” and “How often have you stared at someone’s body?” rated on a 5-point Likert-scale of 1 = (never) to 5 = (almost always). High scores indicate a high level of sexual objectification. The ISOSP has been shown to have high internal consistency of .88 (Gervais et al., 2014).

### **Rape Myths Acceptance**

The Acceptance of Modern Myths about Sexual Aggression scale (AMMSA; Gerger et al., 2007), consists of 30 items measuring adherence to myths relating to sexual aggression. Participants indicated their agreement with statements such as: “When a man urges his female partner to have sex, this cannot be called rape,” using a 7 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). High scores reflect adherence to myths relating to sexual aggression. The AMMSA has been shown to have a high internal consistency of .92 (Gerger et al., 2007).



## Results

The responses to the questionnaires were downloaded from Qualtrics and imported onto the statistic database programme IBM SPSS software version 24 (IBM Corp. Released 2018. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 24.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp). All reverse-scored items in the survey were recoded such that high scores indicated more of the factor. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure that there was no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and multicollinearity. All statistical analyses were conducted using a 0.05 alpha level. Alpha coefficients, means, and standard deviations for the measures of myths about sexual aggression, sexual objectification and hostile attitudes towards women are presented in Table 1.

Bivariate correlations were conducted to examine the relationships among myths about sexual aggression; sexual objectification and hostile attitudes towards women (see Table 2). As expected, endorsement of myths about sexual aggression was positively correlated with both hostile attitudes towards women ( $r = .60$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and sexual objectification ( $r = .23$ ,  $p = .003$ ). As expected, hostile attitudes towards women and sexual objectification were positively correlated ( $r = .32$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The SPSS Macro PROCESS by Hayes (2013), Model 4 was used to examine the indirect effect paths. These paths were bootstrap tested with 5000 resamples thus allowing for a precise estimate of standard error. We hypothesised that hostile attitudes towards women would mediate the relationship between myths about sexual aggression and sexual objectification. The total effect of sexual objectification on rape myths was significant  $B = .23$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $t = 3.06$ ,  $p = .003$ , however the direct effect of sexual objectification on rape myths was non-significant  $B = .06$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $t = 1.68$ ,  $p = .496$ . As expected the indirect path was significant  $B = .17$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $BC\ CI [.05, .29]$ . The above analysis thus supports the hypothesis that myths about sexual aggression has an indirect link to a tendency to sexually objectify women via hostile attitudes towards them (see Figure 1).

## Discussion

The aim of the present study was twofold. First, we aimed to replicate previous research showing that the acceptance of myths about sexual aggression, hostile attitudes towards women, and the tendency to engage in sexually objectifying behaviour are positively correlated. Second, we aimed to assess whether the link

between the acceptance of myths about sexual aggression and the tendency to engage in sexual objectification could be explained by hostile attitudes towards women (i.e., if hostility towards women indirectly linked the other two factors).

As expected, both sexual objectification and hostile attitudes towards women were positively correlated with myths about sexual aggression. The strong positive association between hostile attitudes towards women and myths about sexual aggression is consistent with previous research, which has found that acceptance of rape myths is positively correlated with lower levels of empathy towards rape victims, high levels of victim blaming, sexist attitudes, and hostility towards women (Sriwattanakomen, 2017; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Forbes, Adams-Curtis, Pakalka, & White, 2006; Mason, Riger, & Foley, 2004; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). As previously mentioned, these correlations point to underlying negative and aggressive attitudes that contribute to the treatment of women as existing primarily for pleasure of men; and being underserving of moral concern and treatment.

Additionally as predicted, we found an indirect link between acceptance of myths about sexual aggression and engaging in objectifying behaviour through hostile attitudes towards women. This finding adds to the growing literature on the relationship between sexual objectification and myths about sexual aggression as it points to an underlying explanation for this relationship. More specifically, our findings suggest that men who tend to accept myths about sexual aggression also tend to sexually objectify women when they possess hostile attitudes towards them. Although the correlational nature of our research precludes making causal inferences, our findings also suggest the possibility that hostility may mediate the relationship between acceptance of rape myths and the tendency to sexually objectify women.

This is further evidence that higher levels of sexually objectifying tendencies are part of an inter-related constellation of factors that increase the risk of treating women in more aggressive and anti-social manner. It also suggests that engaging in higher levels of sexualisation of women is not mere innocent fun, or primarily about sexual interest/attraction, but a more detrimental attitudinal and behavioural tendency that assumes women are subordinates to men, justifying the maltreatment of women (both sexual and non-sexual) and minimising its negative impact. In other words, engaging in unwanted and inappropriate objectifying behaviour (e.g., leering or staring at women) may be facilitated and justified not by sexual attraction, but by

hostility. Indeed, a function of myths about sexual aggression is to dismiss or minimise the existence of sexual assault, by denying that there are victims of such crimes, thereby justifying the actions of the perpetrator. Thus, through sexually objectifying women, men are likely supporting and further solidifying hostile attitudes about the subordination of women, and legitimising the hostility directed towards them.

Furthermore, the negative and hostile attitudes related to acceptance of rape myths and objectification may also be related to a wider range of issues involving women's rights (e.g., abortion, social equality). The examination of such potential relationships is outside the scope of our research. However, it is important for future research to study this possibility in order to better understand the extent to which the factors we have examined may have a detrimental effect on the lives of women. We also suggest that future research collectively examine the relationship between sexual objectification, myths about sexual aggression, and different types of aggressive behaviour (verbal, physical & sexual) in order to understand the relationships among these variables in greater depth.

### Limitations

Despite the findings above, the present study is not without limitations. First, due to the sensitivity of the topic area, participants may have modified their responses in a socially desirable manner so as to appear to behave in a less sexually objectifying manner. However, we addressed this limitation by collecting data anonymously online (Maxfield & Babbie, 2008) and our findings still support our hypothesis, which suggests participants were nevertheless honest in their responses. In addition, all measures utilized in the research were self-reports, and thus, are subject to biases associated with this method of measurement. However, evidence has suggested that anti-social attitudes and behaviour, such as sexual objectification, can be accurately assessed through self-reported measures (Woods, Hermann, Nunes, McPhail & Sewell, 2011).

Second, the present study was limited in diversity as the majority of the participants were white heterosexual students. As a result, the findings may not be generalizable to other samples. Future research should try to include a more racially diverse sample for comparative analysis.

Third, due to the correlational, cross-sectional design of the study no causal attributions can be made about the relationships among the variables we examined. It is acknowledged that this is a shortcoming for all correlational research and that causal relationships may differ from those hypothesised above. For example, it is

possible that sexual objectification may influence the relationship between hostile attitudes towards women and myths about sexual aggression. Thus, further research would benefit from employing experimental or longitudinal designs to better assess whether hostility towards women does indeed mediate the relationship between sexual objectification and myths about sexual aggression.

In sum, the current study indicates that myths about sexual aggression and hostile attitudes towards women are positively related to sexual objectification. This study is the first known to find support for the hypotheses, that hostile attitudes towards women provides an indirect link between myths about sexual aggression and the tendency to engage in sexually objectifying behaviour. Thus, this study contributes to the literature on sexual objectification and opens the door for future research to be conducted on the causal relationship among the factors we examined here.

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Table 1

*Alphas, Means, and Standard Deviations for Myths about sexual aggression scale, sexual objectification scale, and hostile attitudes towards women scale.*

	$\alpha$	Mean	Std. Deviation
Myths about sexual aggression	.93	3.09	.83
Sexual Objectification	.82	1.77	.40
Hostile attitudes towards women	.84	2.92	.72

Table 2

*Correlations among sexual objectification, myths about sexual aggression, and hostile attitudes towards women.*

Factor	1	2	3
Objectification	—		
Myths about sexual aggression	—	.23**	
Hostility towards women	.32**	.60**	—

*Note.* \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .001$

Figure 1

Path model illustrating indirect link between myths about sexual aggression and sexual objectification via hostile attitudes towards women. The values are unstandardized B co-efficients. \* =  $p < .05$ .



